



OVERLOOKED

Why we should be doing more to support families and friends affected by someone else's drinking, drug use or gambling.

2021

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Introduction

This latest research looks at the number of people negatively impacted by someone else's drinking, drug taking or gambling.

In line with our 2019 research which looked at families affected by substance use,¹ Adfam found that 5.5 million people are currently dealing with the negative impacts of a friend or family member's drinking, drug taking or gambling.



That's 1 in 10 of us in Great Britain

Adfam's mission is to do as much as we possibly can to help those 5.5 million people. All too often, we find that support and attention is focused on those who have the problem, not the friends and family members who are picking up the pieces.

Yet we know that fear, domestic abuse, loneliness, mental stress, financial difficulty – these can all go hand in hand with having someone with a drug, alcohol or gambling issue in your life. How can a problem that affects millions of people, and for so long, remain so hidden? In the report we outline some solutions to this problem.

Only a quarter of affected families told us in this research that the media and the public give enough recognition and attention to the potential harms they face.

And only a tenth think that national and local Government is doing enough to provide services and support.

The people that Adfam is proud to serve are some of the most resilient you could hope to meet, and I am often amazed by how they cope with the stresses and trauma of seeing a loved one battle with drugs, alcohol or gambling. They deserve to have recognition, and a helping hand, just as much as the person who drinks, uses drugs or gambles.

I feel sure that when you read this report you will come to the same conclusion as Adfam – and join us in a national conversation about how we can better support people struggling to cope and are so often overlooked.

Vivienne Evans,
Adfam Chief Executive

Key Findings

Millions of people in the UK are currently coping with a loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling

- 11% of people are currently negatively affected by a family member or friend's drinking, drug use or gambling.
- That's an estimated five and a half million people in Great Britain.
- Of those five and a half million, the research indicates that approximately four million are most negatively affected by alcohol (8%), one and a half million by drugs (3%) and one million by gambling (2%). ⁴
- Some people have a loved one who is dealing with two or more issues relating to drugs, alcohol and gambling.

The majority of people cope with a loved one's drinking, drug use or gambling for many years

- A third (34%) of those surveyed said they have been negatively affected by a friend or family member's drinking, drug use or gambling for more than ten years and a third (27%) between four and ten years.
- This means the majority of people (61%) surveyed that were affected by a friend or family's drinking, drug use or gambling, have been negatively affected for more than four years.
- Nearly a quarter (24%) said the problem has been on-going for one to three years.

The pandemic's impact on alcohol, drug or gambling problems

- Around a fifth of people (22%) said that the pandemic had made their family members or friends' drinking, drug taking or gambling much more challenging to deal with.
- A quarter said (26%) their family member or friend's alcohol, drugs or gambling had become a problem during the pandemic.
- The pandemic appears to have quite a polarising effect on the increase and decrease of problem gambling, drinking and drug taking.
- Just over a third (37%) said their loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling had increased during the pandemic and 12% said their loved one had relapsed.
- However, a fifth (20%) of survey respondents said it had a positive impact – 13% said their loved one had either reduced their drinking/gambling/drug taking, 6% had turned a corner and 5% been able to stop altogether.

The impact of the pandemic on families and friends affected by alcohol, drug or gambling problems

- Nearly half (48%) said the pandemic had strained their relationship with the person who drinks, uses drugs or gambles.
- 15% said they had suffered more verbal and physical abuse since the beginning of the first lockdown.
- A third (32%) said their mental health has suffered.
- 18% said they are feeling more isolated.
- A third (31%) said they have found it difficult to speak with/see the person who drinks/uses drugs/gambles to offer support because of the pandemic.

The impact of having a loved one with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem on your working life and opportunities

- Just over a third of people (31%) report that their loved one's drinking/drug taking or gambling negatively affects their working life, with 6% needing to take time off/reducing hours, 6% having to take sick leave more frequently and 22% struggling to concentrate/ have a lower level of productivity when they're at work.
- Just under half of those surveyed (45%) felt that they had been disadvantaged in some way because of their family member or friend's drinking, drug use or gambling. The most frequently cited disadvantages were: financial (24%), health (20%) and employment (14%).

How do we better recognise and support families and friends affected by drinking, drug use and gambling?

- Only a quarter (23%) of affected families think the potential harms caused by behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling on families and friends are given sufficient attention and recognition across the media.
- Only around a tenth (9%) of affected families think that national and local Government is doing enough to provide services and support.
- There were a range of things that affected families thought would improve the situation for families and friend affected by someone's drink, drug or gambling problem

The most frequently supported were:

- More information and awareness for families and friends on how to cope and where to get support (50%).
- Greater availability of support services for people who engage in behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling (49%).
- Greater availability of services for the friend or family member negatively affected by behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling (47%).
- Better co-ordination across frontline health services to support people who drink, use drugs or gamble and their families/friends (48%).

Findings

1) Millions of people in the UK are currently coping with a loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling

A family member or friend's drinking, drug use or gambling currently negatively affects 11% of people. That's an estimated one in ten of us – or 5.5 million adults in the UK.

Of those surveyed, people were most likely to report being affected by alcohol use, but someone's drug use or gambling significantly affects their friends and family too. Overall women were slightly more likely to be affected by a loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling (13% of women compared to 10% of men).

| Negatively affected by drinking, drug use or gambling | | Equivalent in GB population |
|---|----|-----------------------------|
| Alcohol use | 8% | 4 million |
| Drug use | 3% | 1.5 million |
| Gambling | 2% | 1 million |

Figure 1: Are you currently negatively affected by a family member or friend's drinking, drug use or gambling (their use of these could either be ongoing or a past one)? (Please select all that apply) **Base:** 2002

People were also asked who they were being negatively affected by, and the results differed slightly for alcohol, gambling and drugs.

| Relation | Alcohol | Drugs | Gambling |
|-----------------|---------|-------|----------|
| Parent/guardian | 22% | 10% | 17% |
| Child | 8% | 16% | 9% |
| Sibling | 16% | 14% | 11% |
| Partner | 20% | 20% | 11% |
| Ex-partner | 4% | 5% | 5% |
| Grandparent | 2% | 0% | 0% |
| Grandchild | 1% | 4% | 2% |
| Friend | 15% | 20% | 8% |
| Other | 15% | 12% | 14% |

Figure 2: Which if any, of the following friends/family member's alcohol use/ drug use/ gambling problem do you feel negatively affected by? **Base:** 224 (Alcohol- 157, Drugs- 70, Gambling- 43)

2) The majority of people are coping with a loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling for many years

An extremely concerning finding of this research is the sheer amount of time that family members and friends are coping with the negative impacts of their loved one's alcohol, drug or gambling problem for, with just under half of respondents (49%) responding that they have been negatively affected by their loved ones drinking, drug taking, or gambling for more than five years.

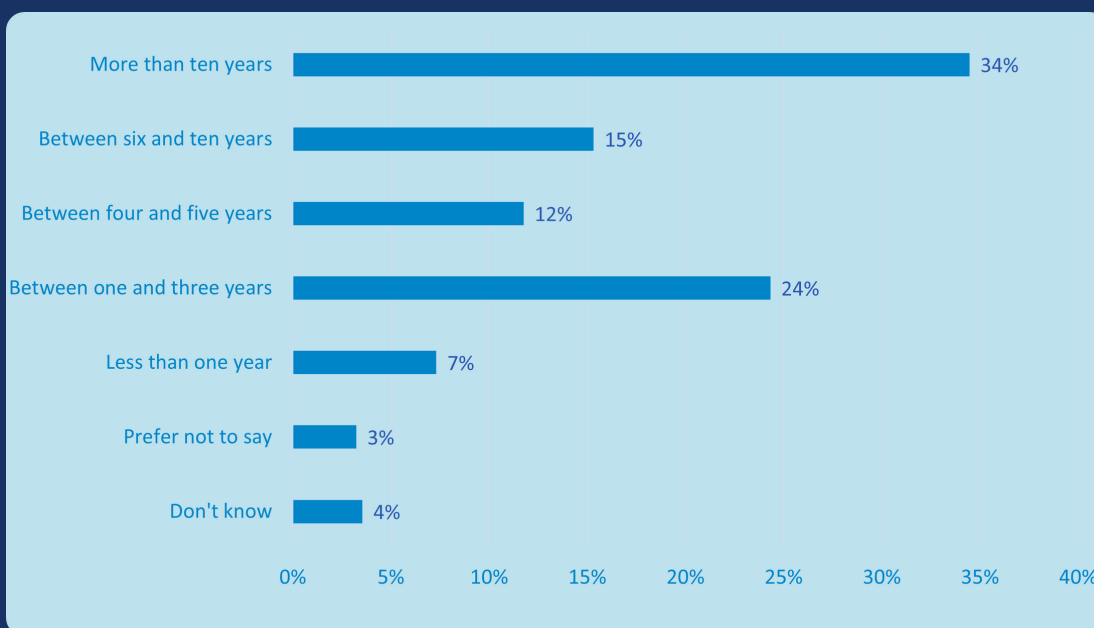


Figure 3: For approximately, how long, has their drinking, drug use and/or gambling been affecting you in a negative way? **Base:** 224

Just as someone who is in recovery from using drugs or alcohol, or gambling, is likely to be affected by the issues in the longer term, so are family members and friends. This demonstrates the need for long term support options for family members and friends. The longer term effects of someone else's drinking, drug taking, or gambling on family members and friends is largely under researched, and this is reflected in current policy.

3) The pandemic's impact on alcohol, drug or gambling problems

One striking finding is that the pandemic is cited as a period where a problem with drugs, alcohol or gambling either developed or worsened for many, whereas for others it was a period where people “turned a corner” and were able to reduce or stop drinking, gambling or drug taking.

| Changes since the first UK lockdown | |
|--|-----|
| Their drinking, drug use and/or gambling has increased | 37% |
| Their physical condition has deteriorated | 28% |
| Their drinking, drug use or gambling has become a problem | 26% |
| They've managed to reduce their drinking/drug use/gambling | 13% |
| They have had a relapse in their drinking, drug use and/or gambling | 12% |
| They have been unable to access/stopped engaging with services to support their drinking, drug use and/or gambling | 10% |
| They've turned a corner with their drinking/drug use/gambling | 6% |
| They've been able to stop drinking/drug use/gambling altogether | 5% |
| They have died as a result of their drinking, drug use or gambling | 3% |
| Other | 2% |

Figure 4: Since the beginning of the first lockdown in the UK (i.e. since March 2020), which, if any, of the following changes have you noticed in them? **Base:** 224

We do know from some earlier research that some families had reported that the pandemic had helped some people to break their behaviours successfully at home, to access treatment online for the first time or to break away from perceived “bad influences”.⁵

Likewise, there is also an increasing volume of evidence highlighting that for some people the opposite is true, and some people developed an alcohol, drugs or gambling problem during the pandemic.⁶

4) The impact on families and friends affected by drinking, drug taking or gambling

For families and friends, the pandemic has also led to new or increased challenges for some.

22% of people said that the pandemic had made their family members or friends' drinking, drug taking or gambling much more challenging to deal with.

Entirely in keeping with our earlier poll of families about how lockdown was affecting them,⁶ the table below does show that people are reporting that the pandemic has led to a rise in verbal and physical violence for some people coping with a loved one's drinking, drug taking or gambling.

32% of people have reported that their mental health has suffered during this time.

Another finding that is noteworthy and in keeping with earlier research by Adfam⁷ is the difficulty faced by many family and friends in undertaking their carer role. A third (31%) said they have found it harder to speak with/ see the person who drinks, uses drugs or gambles to offer support.

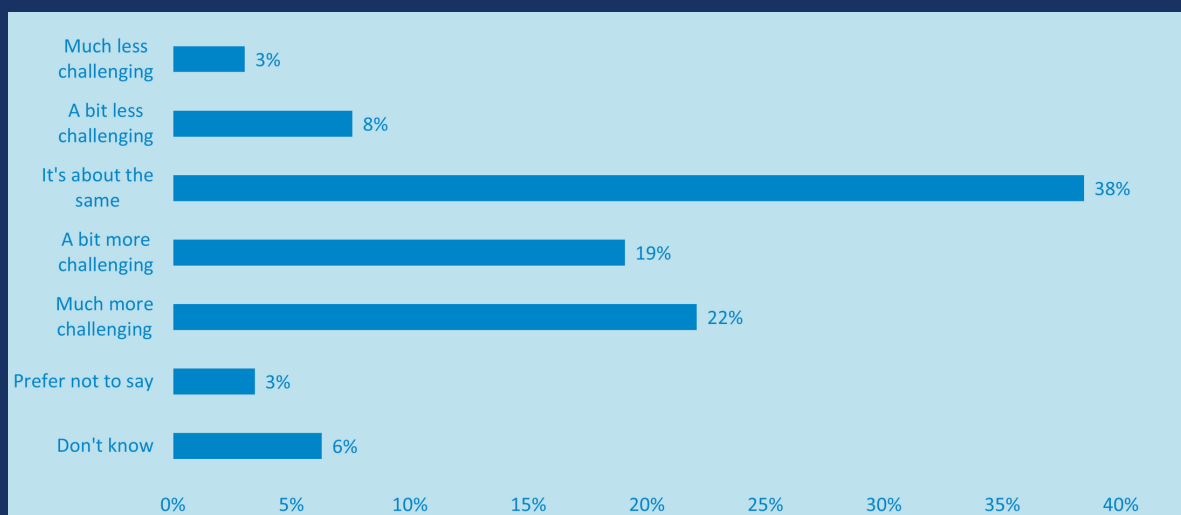


Figure 5: Since the beginning of the first lockdown in the UK (i.e. since March 2020), which, if any, of the following changes have you noticed in them? **Respondents:** 224

The research also highlights the difficulty that some family members and their friends face balancing their work life with the demands placed on them of having a family member or friend with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem.

Just over a third of people reported that their loved ones drinking/ drug taking or gambling negatively affected their working life, including taking time off/ reducing hours (6%), having to take sick leave (6%) and struggling to concentrate/ have a lower level of productivity when they're at work (22%).

Many families and friends feel they face disadvantages because of their situation.

45%

of those surveyed felt that they had been disadvantaged in some way because of their family member or friend's drinking, drug use or gambling,

with the highest responses being financial (24%), health (20%) and employment (14%), as the table below shows.

| Disadvantaged | |
|---|-----|
| Financial (e.g. through lack of income, material wealth, secure housing) | 24% |
| Health (e.g. through lack of access to health services, worse health outcomes) | 20% |
| Employment (e.g. lack of employment prospects) | 14% |
| Education (e.g. through lack of opportunities in school, access to further education) | 11% |
| Cultural (e.g. feeling marginalised from society) | 10% |

Figure 6: In which, if any, of the following ways do you think you or members of your family are disadvantaged?

Base: 2002



24%



20%



14%



11%



10%

5) How do we need to better recognise and support families and friends affected by drinking, drug use and gambling?

Adfam works hard to ensure that we understand what matters to the people who have been affected by a friend or family members drug, alcohol or gambling problem. This research reflects that many people feel there needs to be more recognition by the public, politicians and the media about the challenges they face.

Around a tenth (9%) think that national and local Government is doing enough to provide services and support for families and friends negatively affected by behaviours such as drinking, drug use and gambling.

Around a quarter think that the potential harms of behaviours caused by drinking, drug taking or gambling are given sufficient attention and recognition by the general public (24%) and the media (23%).

However, as the statistics below show, a far higher proportion of survey respondents do not believe the challenges they face are sufficiently supported or recognised in the media, public or by politicians.

63%

disagree or strongly disagree that National and Local Government is doing enough to provide services and support for families and friends negatively affected by behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling.

53%

disagree or strongly disagree that the potential harms of behaviours caused by drinking, drug taking or gambling are given sufficient attention and recognition by the general public.

56%

disagree or strongly disagree that potential harms of behaviours caused by drinking, drug taking or gambling are given sufficient attention and recognition by the media.

When asked what more could be done,

50% respondents rated most highly the need to provide more information and awareness about where families and friends can get information and advice on how to cope and where to get support. Unfortunately, the availability of dedicated support for families members has been declining.

49% feel that there needs to be more support services for people who drink, use drugs or gamble, which has been recognised recently in the drug field by the Dame Carol Black review.

This research also points to the need to support and train frontline professionals to be able to care for families and friends affected by someone's drinking, gambling or drug taking.

48% think that there needs to be better co-ordination among frontline professionals

44% said improved understanding amongst frontline professionals of the impact of behaviours such as drinking, drug taking and gambling on people and those close to them should be a priority,

| Ways to improve support for families | |
|---|-----|
| More information and awareness for families and friends on how to cope and where to get support | 50% |
| Greater availability of support services for people who engage in behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling | 49% |
| Better co-ordination across frontline health services (mental health, substance use, young people's etc.) to support people who drink, use drugs or gamble and their families/friends | 48% |
| Greater availability of support services for families/friends negatively affected by behaviours such as drugs, alcohol and gambling | 47% |
| Improved understanding amongst frontline professionals, such as GP services, around the impact of behaviours such as drinking, drug use or gambling on people and those close to them | 44% |
| A public awareness campaign for the general public to better understand the impact of behaviours such as drugs, alcohol and gambling on families/friends, and to reduce stigma | 41% |
| More information and awareness around the harms related to drugs, alcohol and gambling and the impact on families and friends | 38% |
| Tighter controls around gambling marketing and availability | 35% |
| Tighter controls around alcohol marketing and availability | 29% |

Figure 7: In which, if any, of the following ways do you think you or members of your family are disadvantaged?
Base: 2002

Recommendations

1) Increase services to support children and adults affected by a loved one's substance misuse or gambling

National and Local Government should reverse the sharp decline in support available to people coping with a family member's drug, alcohol or gambling problem, as evidenced in Adfam's State of the Sector report.⁸

The decline in service provision began before COVID-19 and it means millions of people who need help are being left to struggle alone. Dedicated support for family members coping with a loved one's drug, alcohol or gambling problem should be provided urgently if we are to function effectively as an equal and healthy society.

There should also be an increased urgency on providing support services now that evidence shows that many families and friends have additional mental health needs, or are experiencing increased physical and mental health, following the pandemic.

Given the findings in this research about the long term negative impacts of coping with a loved one's drug, alcohol or gambling problem, Adfam also recommends that the duration of support on offer is urgently reviewed. Too often support for family member's and friends is only for the duration of the user's treatment.

2) Ensure that where services are available, families and friends of people with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem are prioritised for identification and referral

Family members deal with many different impacts of their loved one's drug, alcohol and gambling problem - frequently dealing with stigma, caring responsibilities, trauma, safeguarding issues, financial distress and more.

So it is important that family members are considered a priority group for statutory and voluntary sector services, for instance mental health or domestic abuse services.

However, all too often, family members can "fall through the cracks" and miss out on vital support as a result. Family members often don't self-refer to services, either because they are in crisis and/or they are focused on their loved one's recovery. Their needs are often quite complex or hidden, so support needs to be offered proactively and highly effective identification and referral pathways need to be in place.

Adfam recommends that there needs to be a training package for those who signpost to, or commission, services where family members may first present, for example at a GP service or foodbank. Pathways should also enable the multiple areas of vulnerability for family members to be identified and addressed in their own right, as well as the needs of the person with the drug, alcohol or gambling problem. Pathways and referrals need to include an element of crisis planning, because of the nature of the issues that many families are facing, such as verbal and physical abuse.

3) Ensure that families and friends who have vital caring responsibilities are recognised and supported financially, emotionally and practically

Throughout this research, and earlier research undertaken by Adfam⁹ it is apparent that many families and friends have been prevented at times from carrying out vital caring duties during the pandemic.

It is also apparent what substantial support a family member often has to offer a loved one with a drink, drug or gambling problem – be it caring for their dependents, looking after their physical needs or providing emotional, practical and financial support.

Not only do these caring roles benefit people with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem, they also benefit society as a whole.

Adfam recommends that the Government reviews and recognises the vital role of all carers during the pandemic and beyond, and offers appropriate support to ensure these roles do not take their toll on them, and that they are supported to provide this support should they wish to do so.

4) Ensure that family members of people with drug, alcohol and gambling issues are included in all relevant Parliamentary Inquiries and policy making

The impact on the family of someone with a drug, alcohol or gambling problem is often life changing, and life lasting.

There has been some excellent work by Parliamentarians themselves looking at harm to families and friends, and some really excellent Government initiatives to address harm to particular groups, for example the Children of Alcohol Dependent Parents (CAdEP) programme funded by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Dame Carol Black's Reviews of Drugs¹⁰ also represents a key opportunity to improve drug treatment and recovery services across England, and Adfam, along with a number of family focused organisations have responded outlining how the needs of families can be met through this review.

Adfam recommends that given the scale and longevity of the negative impacts of drug, alcohol and gambling problems on families and friends, this should always be considered as a priority in any Parliamentary investigations or policy making concerning alcohol drugs or gambling.

Adfam also recommends that where appropriate families and close friends of people with a drink, drug or gambling problem should be considered as a priority when considering policy relating to the impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable groups, mental health policies, domestic abuse and safeguarding.

Footnotes

1. [Adfam/YouGov 2019](#)
2. [Adfam/ YouGov 2019](#)
3. [Adfam/YouGov 2019](#)
4. Census Ref
5. [Adfam 2020: Families in Lockdown – the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the family and friends of someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem.](#)
6. [Alcohol Change 2020](#)
7. [Adfam 2020: Families in Lockdown – the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the family and friends of someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem.](#)
8. [Adfam: State of the Sector 2019 – Drug and Alcohol Family Support](#)
9. [Adfam 2020: Families in Lockdown – the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on the family and friends of someone with an alcohol, drug or gambling problem.](#)
10. [Department of Health and Social Care 2021 - Review of drugs: phase two report](#)
11. [Dame Carol Black Review- A response from the family support sector 2021](#)

About this survey

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2061 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 15th - 16th June 2021. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

About Adfam

Adfam is the only national charity tackling the effects of alcohol, drug use or gambling on family members and friends. We do this by:

- empowering families and friends affected by drugs, alcohol or gambling to get the support they need.
- building the confidence, capacity and capability of frontline practitioners to provide effective services.
- influencing decision-makers to understand the needs of thousands of people coping with the effects of a family member or friend misusing alcohol or drugs, or gambling.

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